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AUTHOR Ryan, Alan G.
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ABSTRACT

Graduate students in a program evaluation class carried out small case-study evaluations, and examined the participants' reactions to the evaluation report. The programs included an experimental high school drama course, a high school music apprenticeship program, and a sixth grade computer course on problem solving. There were three phases of data collection: (1) before the graduate students presented the case study report, they interviewed the teacher and the most closely involved administrator concerning their expectations of any evaluation report; (2) a sheet for recording reactions to the report was left with the participant; and (3) a week after the report was delivered, participants were interviewed concerning their opinions of the report's truthfulness and their plans to use the information. The teachers indicated that they often assessed truthfulness by consulting with their colleagues. Three types of truth--confirmatory, affirmational, and inherent--were listed. Additional factors included the empathy of the evaluator and the power of a well-written report. (GDC)

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How Case-Study Evaluations Are Received by Those Who Are
Evaluated

by

Alan G. Ryan
Department of Curriculum Studies
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, S7N 0W0

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How Case-Study Evaluations Are Received by Those Who Are
Evaluated

Evaluators have long been interested in how their findings are perceived by those who are expected to act upon them. Indeed, whole books (for example, Alkin, Daillak, and White, 1979; Patton, 1978) have been devoted to the subject. In her study of how professionals made use of new information, Kennedy (1983) identified three analytically distinct processes involved in the use of evidence:

The first is that of seeking out new evidence and attending to it; the second is that of incorporating it into existing working knowledge, and the third is that of applying it to working situations as they arise. (p. 196)

When case-study evaluations are considered, the first process does not apply since the participants are already aware of the existence of the case study. The other two, however, are important; this study explores them through an examination of how two case-study participants in each of three case-study evaluations assessed the extent to which the case-study findings on their study were true for them. The paper concentrates upon the processes by which the recipients of the reports judged the truth of the findings. Evaluators who conduct case study evaluations need to

understand these processes because if the case-study findings do not earn a judgement of truth from the recipients, those recipients are unlikely to take the next step of acting on the basis of the report's findings.

The emergence of case-study evaluations as an acceptable way of generating data for change (Science Council of Canada, 1984; Stake and Easley, 1978) brings with it its own set of issues when the notion of the truth of the findings is being considered (Ryan, 1983). In this paper will be described a study which attempted to examine one of these issues: granted the relative nature of subjective truth -- a concept that lies behind the hermeneutic style of case-study evaluations (Smith, 1984) -- what factors govern how the recipients receive and then act upon the findings of case-study evaluations?

The study

Three graduate students in the author's program evaluation class elected to carry out small case-study evaluations as their major assignment for the course. Two of these concentrated upon the evaluation of two experimental courses in a local high school and the third evaluated the effects, as perceived by the teachers involved, of a computer-based problem solving program in Grade Five and Six classrooms. Being class assignments, the evaluations were not as

comprehensive as they would have been had they been conducted by a professional evaluator, but they were, within their limits, well-defined and conscientiously and competently done.

The author took no overt part in the evaluations. His role was to be a behind-the-scenes resource who was available to the students to discuss the emerging issues and to offer advice and support. As far as the clients in the three programs were concerned, the students were the sole evaluators. They were the ones who negotiated the focus of the studies, gained access, carried out the evaluations and presented the reports. The study described in this paper drew on the experiences at the three sites, but was portrayed to the evaluation clients as the independent study it was. There were three data-collection phases.

Phase 1. Shortly before the students were due to present their reports, the researcher interviewed two people attached to each program: the teacher who was delivering the program, and the administrator who had the closest involvement with the program and who would, along with the teacher, be expected to take appropriate action on the strength of the findings. He explained that he was interested in finding out from the participants their response to evaluation or research reports. During the

first interview he asked a wide range of questions of the participants concerning the subjects paraphrased below:

What aspects of a report make it appealing to you?

How do you like evaluation or research findings to be disseminated?

What factors (e.g. the authority of the researcher, the style of writing, the data collection, reporting and analysis procedures) affect the impact of a report?

How do you estimate the truth of the findings of a report?

In what ways does your estimate of the truth of a report relate to its effectiveness?

The focus of this interview was on reports in general, and not on the specific report of the study in which they were participating. At no time during the study did the researcher define the word "truth". The ways in which the interviewees used the term emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts.

Phase 2. At the conclusion of the first interview, the researcher left behind a sheet which the participant was to keep until the evaluation report was delivered and on which the participant was asked to record his or her initial reactions to the report. No specific directions or headings were given to the respondents, but they were made aware that

the interest of the study was upon their perception of the truth of the report and how they assessed that.

Phase 3. After at least a week had elapsed since the delivery of the report, and in light of the participants' first interviews and their initial reaction sheets, a second interview was conducted. This time, the main intent was to find out the respondents' assessment of the truth of the newly-delivered report, how they arrived at that assessment, and what they were going to do about the report now that they possessed the findings.

The Three Programs

A. "High School Drama" The course offered students the opportunity to learn some of the crafts of theatre and also to improve their self-knowledge and self-concept through creative drama activities. Mr. Ruby, the teacher, was an experienced English teacher who had developed this course with the encouragement of the administration. Mr. Hazel, the principal, was the administrator interviewed for this study. He has a strong background in both English and drama; he was highly supportive of the course and very interested in the evaluation study.

B. "Music Apprentice" This program was also operating in the same large urban high school as the drama program. Again, it sprang from the personal initiative of the

teacher, a music and band instructor. Mr. Miller had developed a program whereby exceptionally gifted music students could earn credits by working with him both behind the scenes and also in a leadership capacity (for example, conducting bands and helping during sectional practice). The administrator chosen to participate in this study was Mr. Griffiths, a central office superintendent who had the responsibility of forwarding to the Provincial Department of Education an evaluation of the program. The Music Apprentice course had been authorized by the Department on a provisional basis with the condition that the school board submit an evaluation (although not necessarily the evaluation described in this study).

C. "Problem-solve with Computers" The school board had recently adopted a commercially available program designed to allow elementary students to gain problem solving skills by requiring them to devise a means of drawing figures on the computer screen. Ms. Dart was one of the teachers offering the course and Mr. Cook was the central office consultant who was monitoring the progress of the new program.

The Response to the Reports

For reasons of space, only the report on the drama program will be reported upon in some depth; illustrations using the other two reports will be made where appropriate.

How the Teachers Assessed the Level of Truth of the Reports

In the initial interview, Mr. Ruby had said that one of the ways he evaluated in his own mind the level of truth of a report of a program was through consultation with peers who had tried the program.

R (during a discussion of an earlier report of an innovative program): How do you evaluate in your own mind the level of truth?

Mr. Ruby: The fact that other people have tried it and heard good things about it and experienced good things about it. So it's practical application, I guess. The fact that it achieved success.

R: Is that a general way in which you evaluate the truth of findings, by checking them with your colleagues?

Mr. Ruby: If it is appropriate, yes. I think I would tend to do that as often as it was possible to do that.

This process of estimating the truth of a report by checking, more or less informally, one's personal beliefs

against the perceptions of truth held by colleagues ("confirmable truth") was echoed by the other teachers. Ms. Dart, the teacher involved in the computer literacy study, also set great store by the views of her colleagues. She talked of relying on the friends that she has and the people that are "in the know". And not only peers were relied upon. In discussing an earlier report which she had rated as very truthful, she responded to the question: "How did you evaluate in your own mind that level of truth?"

It came from ... a reputable source. No reason to doubt it. It had come through proper channels... Basically, any [reports] put into our mail boxes pretty well come through [the principal].

Mr. Miller also used confirmation from colleagues to help him in his assessment of the truth of a report. In a discussion of a particularly ineffective report that had appeared some years earlier, the following dialogue took place.

R: Thinking of that ineffective report, how true did you feel were its findings?

Mr. Miller: They were not true at all.

R: On what basis did you evaluate in your own mind that level of truth?

Mr. Miller: Through the experience of the person involved as far as accomplishment in the area that he was complaining about. In what I had heard in the system.

R: Your private knowledge?

Mr. Miller: Yes.

When, during the second round of interviews, attention once again turned to the aspect of how one establishes the level of truth in a report, the role of confirmation by peers came up again.

Mr. Ruby expressed an overall confidence in the truthfulness of the report on his program although he did feel that some of the orientation of the case study sprang from the evaluator's known view of what it was that creative drama courses should try to accomplish. After digesting the report, Mr. Ruby took several initiatives; interestingly, the first step he took was to estimate the level of confirmable truth. In this instance, however, he had no colleagues to turn to since it was his unique program which was the subject of the case study evaluation. Instead, he turned to the students, the only other people who participated in the case study. He discussed the findings of the report with the students and used that dialogue to gain a greater understanding of the students' views of what the course was supposed to be about. He found that the evaluation report was a fair reflection of the students'

feelings; the checking of the report's findings against the views of the students helped him confirm the report's truthfulness.

Ms. Dart, because she was one of several teachers participating in the "Problem solve with computers" evaluation, was able to consult with her colleagues:

R: How true did you feel were the findings of this report?

Ms. Dart: Good, I really did.

R: What helped you have confidence in the findings?

Ms. Dart: I had that interest initially and...I thought "Well, I want to read these and see, because I know P [a colleague] felt the same way. A girlfriend of mine, she said: "Have you read the [computer study] report?" And G. [another colleague] says the same thing to me... We wanted to see if others were feeling the same way.

On the other hand, Mr. Miller, the music teacher, did not consult with any colleagues to seek confirmation of the truth of the report. He felt that the report represented very faithfully the program and, anyway, there was nobody apart perhaps from the evaluator herself who knew as much as Mr. Miller about his own program. The report was strong in "affirming truth", a term which will be discussed below when

the views of Mr. Hazel, the administrator who coined the term, are given.

How the Administrators Assessed the Level of Truth of the Reports

Whereas for the teachers their primary method of verifying the findings of a report is through confirmation with their professional colleagues, the administrators used a wider variety of techniques. Mr. Hazel began his discussion of how he assesses the truth of a report by distinguishing between what for him were two different kinds of truth:

I can say: "There is truth in that" because it affirmed or confirmed beliefs of mine...The other kind of truth...builds from the inherent qualities of the report -- apart from what I believe.

In his discussion of the concept of "affirming truth", Mr. Hazel said this:

Affirmation is a very important point for drawing the reader into a trust relationship with the report. I don't think that it has to be artificial affirmation ("Things are wonderful, everything is fine" and all that) but rather some very specific points that cause some good feeling. I think you generate change by

first of all having the person feel comfortable and positive about some practices that are currently in place.

When asked how he evaluated the level of the second type of truth, the inherent truth, he said:

It generated action on my part. I suppose if I can be moved to action by what I read then that shows a sort of truth or belief in it [the report]... The data and the conviction of the writer in the conclusion drawn from the data generated my response.

Mr. Cook, the administrator in the computer literacy study, relied, as did the teachers, mainly upon confirmable truth. In commenting upon an earlier report that he had perceived as presenting true findings, he said:

It was done by people that I know, who are teachers I know, with schools that I know...I like a report that's close to home, that's done with our kids and our settings as opposed to faraway places where you may not know the setting as well and possibly the person who is preparing the report.

For Mr. Cook, the closeness to home was not simply a matter of the greater applicability of findings which had been generated in a system in which the findings would be most

easily implemented, but it was a very real way of validating the findings of a report, regardless of whether these findings were going to be implemented in the schools. He also indicated that he would use local expert resources (for example, a university professor who was a specialist in Mr. Cook's discipline) to help validate the findings of a report.

Whilst Mr. Griffiths, the administrator for the music apprentice program evaluation, emphasized the importance to him of what is being called here "affirming truth", he also reported that he would use the expert resources available to him in the system in order to confirm the findings of a report. He also was receptive to inherent truth; for him, the inherent truth of a report derived from its internal consistency.

The Relationship Between the Types of Truth and Engenderment of Action

The three types of truth identified from the analysis of the interviews are obviously three extremes. They are at least to some degree rationalizations of a holistic process of assessing truth. However, the analysis of the concept of truth into the subcomponents of confirmatory truth, affirmational truth and inherent truth is useful when we consider the requirements which a case study evaluation must

meet in order to achieve its purpose of bringing about action. The three types will be discussed in turn, in ascending order of significance for case study evaluation reports.

Confirmable Truth

For teachers and other professionals, seeking confirmation from colleagues of one's perceptions of the truth of a report is a common way of achieving verification (House, 1974; Schon, 1983). Often it is the most powerful way by which change is instigated; there are strong social forces at play here. However, because it is socially derived and driven, and can operate almost independently of the realities of the report, it is of least concern to us here. One point that did emerge from the case studies of the drama and computer courses was that the teachers sought confirmation from other participants in the study. That suggests that the evaluator, by delimiting the personnel involved in a case study, may be affecting arbitrarily the sources of confirmable truth to which participants can later turn for verification. More work is needed in this area.

Affirming Truth

This type of truth arises directly from the interpretation by the client of the report. Since it is a quality of those parts of a report which directly affirm what the client

believes, it does not itself lead to action, but is a necessary prelude to the taking of action. It is the link between the mind of the evaluator and the mind of the client; its presence indicates that the evaluator has interpreted correctly (correctly in the sense of similarly) the viewpoint of the client-reader. Affirming truth in a report establishes a bond between the two parties involved. Mr. Hazel, when asked if the report on the drama program had contained affirming truth for him, said:

Yes, I think it did. And what it did -- and this is based on some knowledge of drama -- is it affirmed my belief that there are two schools of thought [on what a drama course should aim for] and that becomes apparent here.

The drama teacher, Mr. Ruby, felt that even though he disagreed with some of the recommendations of the report, the findings affirmed what was going on in the class. Interestingly, he felt this even though he needed to perform some interpretation on the details of the report to reach his judgement.

R: How true did you feel that [the evaluator's] findings were, even the ones that came as a shock?

Mr. Ruby: Very true. I think they were accurate reflections of what was going on and the things that the

kids found important. In a sense -- and I guess I am reading into the kids' minds a bit -- they were saying... "this is new and no one ever told us about this, that this was going to happen. This is really kind of neat and really kind of fun!" And they didn't get to the point of saying: "Oh, and we're also learning theatre." I think it was there, but they just didn't say it, if you know what I mean.

Mr. Griffiths also felt that the Music Apprentice report contained affirming truth:

My reaction to the report was very positive because I started off with a mind-set. I say [to myself, about all programs] "Is what we are doing worth it?" And if I go through [the report] and the testimonials are saying: "This was a very worthwhile experience for me" then I say obviously we are doing something right. That came through from the students, the teacher, and the parents, so I feel very positive about that.

On the other side of the coin, if the report does not contain what the reader feels is affirming truth, anything else the report may say is probably not going to engender change. Mr. Miller, trying to convey to the researcher how an earlier report totally failed to make a connection between the writer of the report and the reader, said:

Let me put this in an analogy. "If you were a good curriculum studies professor, you would do these things. If you are not, you end up doing what you're doing now... Start doing something that is reasonable and successful for your people." You look at this and say: "Get lost!" That's what [that report] was like.

If affirming truth is the quality that a report must have in order to build credibility and trust between the researcher and the client, then inherent truth is the requirement for moving people from the present situation (which has been affirmed) to a new situation.

Inherent Truth

As Mr. Hazel said, there is for the recipient of a report a kind of truth that "builds from the inherent qualities of the report -- apart from what I believe". It is this type of truth that gives the recipient the confidence and motivation to move from the present position which has been affirmed to a new position along the lines suggested by the report. This type of truth was difficult for the participants to describe in words but they had no doubts that they would recognize it when they felt it. At least two dimensions of it seemed to come through from the interview data: the requirement that the recipient perceive that the evaluator is empathetic to the program and to the

participants in the program, and the power of the report which arises from its being well written and constructed.

The empathetic evaluator. It was important for the teacher participants to feel that the evaluator could resonate with their situation, could empathize with the teacher and what the teacher was trying to accomplish. A portion of the post-report interview with Mr. Miller highlights this:

Mr. Miller: I would think that that report was, in her estimation -- and I respect what she was doing -- accurate in as far as she can see and as far as she can develop it, so I have no problems with it...

R: One thing that struck me about [the evaluation report] was that she drew very heavily on you; that she had a lot of interviews with you and a lot of come-back time, and so on. Did you feel that she captured your views on it?

Mr. Miller: I think throughout the interviews there was a lot of insight for me... This is the first time in a couple of years that I have ever talked to anyone about any details of the course, which was helpful for me...She seemed to portray that in the report...and she talked about some great things in there too, which I didn't think she had caught.

For Mr. Ruby, the empathy arose from the evaluator's drama experience, and from his willingness to help out Mr. Ruby in

the classroom from time to time (with, for example, small-group work). This empathy did not extend, however, to a wholesale acceptance of the evaluation report's findings:

The report was legitimate because it did express what was going on...Now, I think I'm still doing the same thing; it's just that now I am more aware of what I'm doing. The report seemed to imply (to me anyway) that that is all that I should do...And I am not prepared to go that far yet. But the report is legitimate in that it does express what is happening here in terms of the interpersonal things and the interaction things.

The power of a well-written report. The drama report initiated some immediate action. Whilst the report had found that the course was an effective one, measured against the expressed expectations of the teacher, it was actually achieving outcomes that the evaluator felt were even more significant than the ones which Mr. Ruby had offered as those of the course. Mr. Ruby's initial reaction to the report (which had been presented to him on a one-to-one basis by the evaluator) was complex. He wrote:

My reactions to the report changed as we went through it. At first I was pleased and somewhat proud that my students' responses and feelings about the class were the same as mine...Then I noticed that some of their

perceptions, and the reporter's perceptions as stated in the report began to differ from mine and my initial pleasure turned to a momentary fear that I had failed to communicate my meanings and perceptions to them. Then I noticed myself becoming a bit angry with the reporter because he seemed to be criticizing my work and my class (which of course in reality he was not).

In his report, the evaluator had concentrated on two main findings from his study of the drama course. First, the course seemed to be offering students some exciting and unanticipated outcomes (in the area of self-expression and self-knowledge) which the evaluator felt should become the focus of the course. Second, the students were concerned over some aspects of the teacher's evaluation procedures. After verifying with his students that the report's findings did indeed reflect their views, Mr. Ruby, in light of the impact of the report, moved to take action concerning the findings. While never surrendering his professional autonomy and judgment, he set in train a course of action to change his program. There were in essence two steps:

1. He carefully weighed the report's findings on the unanticipated outcomes of the course. He decided that he did not want the course to evolve too far along the path of institutionalizing these outcomes because that would mean

sacrificing aspects of the course which he felt were even more important. He also felt that whilst these outcomes might have been unexpressed, they were probably not truly unanticipated since he had subconsciously provided a setting where they could appear.

2. He initiated a plan to make more explicit his intentions for the course. In this way he could reaffirm his basic purposes for the course, accommodate to some degree the "unanticipated" outcomes within his plan, and make more clear to the students his policies on evaluation.

The administrator, Mr. Hazel, set strict criteria by which he judged the inherent truth of a report. If these criteria were not met, then the effectiveness of the report, its power to promote change, would be compromised. (In general, the three administrators in this study had criteria of this kind, although not always the same criteria. This is probably an outcome of their having to read many more reports in the course of their duties than do the teachers.) For Mr. Hazel, clarity was crucial. He required of a report "that it be lucid, above all else, and precise and that it have an absence of 'educese'. I think the English language has enough options that one can use highly concrete words." This portion of the interview continued:

R: And would you go so far as to say that that quality of the report will actually influence the way you receive a report?

Mr. Hazel: Very definitely. I'm very influenced by the way in which things are written. And my trust of research is very much based on the lucidity with which it is presented.

Mr. Hazel's criterion of stylistic excellence came to the fore when he wrote his initial reaction to the drama course evaluation report:

Throughout the initial reading I wanted to "red-pen" the form and structure. I was troubled by punctuation problems...I looked for titles to chapters.

Since [those were] unavailable, I

had no alternative but to begin at the beginning.

What the foregoing...reveals is perhaps my idiosyncratic reading of analytical material.

I first want to be able to provide myself with an overview of the report. I then am quite

likely at first to read the report out of sequence and then, if I am caught by a particular relevance, to read it through from beginning to end.

When asked about the apparent contradiction arising from the fact that the Drama evaluation report apparently did not meet his criteria and yet was proving to be the catalyst for

an extensive review of Mr. Ruby's course, Mr. Hazel gave two reasons: first, he knew of this researcher's interest in the case study, and second, Mr. Ruby had asked for his assistance in revamping the framework of the drama course. He commented:

I think I might have missed the value of this if this had been given to me [with no other follow-up]. If this were in a journal I'm not sure I would have pursued it to the degree I have pursued it because there was a task associated with it. And I would have been the loser in that because I would have missed a clear direction that we got from this report.

Implications for the Conduct of Case Study Evaluations

Of late, evaluators have paid much attention to the issue of ensuring that their reports make a difference. From an examination of how knowledge from social science research can change practitioners' available base of information, Kennedy (1983) feels that there are two possible ways in which social science evidence and working knowledge can interact.

On the one side, Weiss (1977, 1980) has shown that evidence feeds into working knowledge, expands it, and can have a major role in changing it... But on the other side of the relationship, working knowledge

is used to interpret new evidence and to judge the validity and applicability of each new source of evidence encountered. (p.195)

One of the mediating forces between the evidence and the working knowledge seems to be the truth, in its different forms, which the participant feels the evidence (in this instance, the case-study report) contains. Noblit (1984) has expressed it this way:

Knowledge is always potentially useful. All that is required is that humans find it sufficiently convincing to incorporate it into their personal modes of knowing and valuing. (p. 95)

In Maxwell's (1984) terms, the consumers are pursuing wisdom by using knowledge to guide them. Maxwell sharpens the distinction between knowledge and wisdom by showing that wisdom is the knowledge derived from inquiry expanded by its being used by human beings in human settings:

If inquiry is to help us realize what is of value, it must attend to our feelings and desires: the very articulation of problems of living requires the expression of feelings and desires. According to the philosophy of wisdom, in fact, reason -- rational action -- is essentially so inter-relating action, experience, feeling, desire, aim, imagination and

doubt that we give ourselves the best chances, other things being equal, of realizing what is of value.
(p.331)

The participants in this study were using knowledge to gain wisdom. One important filter through which the knowledge was passing en route to its assigned task of bringing about change was the filter of truth. "Certainly 'truth' does exist and it is of great interest to professionals, when they can use it, as a basis for determining courses of action" (Sergiovanni, 1985). By understanding more deeply what types of truth participants in case-study evaluations employ in their filtering mechanism, we shall gain a deeper understanding of how case-study evaluations should be reported so that they can achieve their aim of bringing about change.

NOTE

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